DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 309 546 EA 021 170

AUTHOR Hill, Kenneth G.
TITLE Grade Retention and Dropping Out of School.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, March 27-31, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Dropout Characteristics; *Dropout Prevention; Dropout Rate; *Grade Repetition; *High Risk Students; High School Students; Secondary Education

ABSTRACT

Children who have been retained even at the kindergarten or first grade level, regardless of their socioeconomic status, are at risk of dropping out later on. Alternative or pullout programs may not be suitable compensatory approaches for preventing school dropouts. Five changes will help to mitigate the effects of retention on student dropouts. First, teachers and administrators must realize that education should not be a selective process where curriculum, tests, behavioral objectives, and retention policies are developed for the purpose of screening people out of the system. Second, the realization must come that quantitative assessments that measure attainment of skills are devices that have no relationship to quality, but rather tend to reduce the creativity in learning and encourage mediocrity in teaching. Third, because children, even if retained, fare better in a familiar environment, offcampus programs must be reexamined and more relevant approaches to education initiated. Fourth, a climate that fosters confidence for children should be developed in schools. And finally, at-risk children should be identified early, and programs for them must be status oriented, motivational, and integrated into the structure of the school. All children can learn, and if a child is not learning, something must be done immediately. (KM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED309546

GRADE RETENTION AND DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL

A Discussion Paper Read at the AERA Annual Meeting

March 28, 1989

Kenneth G. Hill

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Kenneth G. Hill

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

EA 021 170

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

GRADE RETENTION AND DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL

A Discussion Paper Read at the AERA Annual Meeting

March 28, 1989

Kenneth G. Hill

My task is to discuss the implications of the research findings in today's papers for policy and practice in the field.

I am a school Superintendent in a District with a minority population of 55%. About 45% of the students in the district are immigrants from rural Mexico. The District has 14 schools serving 7,500 students in grades Kindergarten through eighth. The district has a broad spectrum of socio-economic levels educating kids from some extremely wealthy families to those from the lowest poverty levels.

I give that background because it emphasizes my supreme interest in the topic being discussed today. In our district we have a great concern for the number of children being retained and the number who drop out of high school. During my career, I have cited research to teachers regarding the ill effects of retention, appealed to their common sense, showed examples of students who were not helped by the retention process, and I have yet to convince teachers to be more prudent about retaining students. In my district we have a well developed drop out prevention program, we constantly dispute the value of retaining students, we have reached consensus on a definition of high expectation which down plays retention as a useful procedure, and yet the rate of retention of students through the years has reduced very little. Our research, for some reason, is not convincing to teachers or there has been nothing developed to ameliorate the conditions that cause student retention. As Grissom and Shepard point out in their paper, "retention remains acceptable because practitioners either aren't aware of or don't believe the research evidence." In the District where I work the research is known and discussed; I know the awareness is there, but retention practices continue.

As a practitioner in the field, I sometimes feel ashamed. I walk through our two middle schools and see young men attending classes who have to shave twice in a day if they plan to go out in the evening. These are kids who were placed a couple of grades below the level corresponding with their ages when they entered the system three or four years ago. These are students who Rice, in his paper, may categorize as Group II children; overaged but uncertain as to whether they

have been truly retained. The original placements of these children were made because of their inability to speak English when they first entered American schools. In other cases, Kindergarten teachers retain children who come to school with limited English language skills because they don't want to send them to the first grade where there may be a narrow, one dimensional curriculum with workbooks and ditto sheets. So children are retained in Kindergarten and maybe again in either the first or second grade. Believe me folks at that level and at that time those children are at risk of dropping out later on. In addition to those realities, I consider Jim Catterwall's research on the efficacy of proficiency exams for deciding who will graduate from high school and it makes one feel like Christian at the Slough of Despond.

The research is clear and it has remarkable significance for reviewing policies and practices in the field and I will get to that part of the discussion soon. But I wish to summarize some of the salient points made in these papers as they apply to me as a school superintendent and which confirmed some of my biases. Then I will move to the implication they have for the field:

Baenen and Hopkins studied alternative programs in Austin and the success of these programs in reducing drop outs. The upshot of the study of the programs was that retention may be better than certain alternative pull out programs for children who are failing. Their study sheds light on methods for shoring up deficiencies of students who can't pass the proficiency gate requirement. Alternative programs or, for that manner, any pull out programs may not be suitable compensatory approaches for preventing school drop outs.

Grissom and Shepherd again proved through their structural equation model that retention is definitely a factor affecting student drop outs and that is as apparent in high socio economic groups as it is for students in low economic levels. The relationship of retention to school drop out is irrefutable. In policy and practice we must look at methods for eliminating retention, but something must also be done in making teachers and the public feel it is a less than reasonable alternative.

Catterall's study explored the effects that minimal competency tests have on students in forming decisions on dropping out of school. His conclusions certainly have direct implications for policy and practice in middle school and secondary education. The most glaring outcome for me as a practitioner is the caviler manner in which these exams are viewed by administrators and counselors and the effect that the exam may have on "dumbing

down" a curriculum. The views of Administrators regarding proficiency tests and the descriptions of the testing outcomes create a superficial attitude toward the educational process. High expectations for students are replaced with a lock step series of hurdles which essentially allows the graduate to say, "I have fought the war, and survived." The challenge of learning is replaced by the hum drum realities of a one dimensional quantitative system which lacks quality, depth and substance.

Rice's Study in the city of Chicago again reinforced the effects of retention on school drop out rates. The drop out syndrome begins very early in a child's education. The manifestation of that drop out potential surfaces when a child is in middle school or early high school years and at those levels the effects of early retention are more clearly seen. In this study a tie was made to reading skills, retention and drop outs. In my opinion, comprehensive reading skills have the most direct relationship to success in school.

The idea of bonding or the feeling for teachers and the educational institution by students may have an effect on reducing drop outs. As was indicated in Baenen and Hopkins study, the possible relationship of the retainees with a known environment may have made them more successful than those students who were not retained, but instead placed in alternative programs. Recognizing that I had to reach a little for that implication, I believe that the least restrictive environment, a consistent relationship with an adult, and heterogeneous grouping practices mitigate the at-riskness of certain kids.

Another issue which pervades the studies discussed today is the whole idea of self esteem and success in school. The studies expressed the effect of retention on the self esteem of students, the effect of failing proficiency tests on student self esteem, and the placement of people in alternative programs and its effect on self esteem, etc. With this evidence we could consider that low self esteem may be the precursor to school failure.

In assessing the relevancy of these studies to educational policy, I am fortunate to be able to look at the high school system with an objective eye. In California there are often separate high school districts that have a number of independent elementary districts feeding into them. Therefore, as an elementary district superintendent, I don't have to defend the high school program or protect it from criticism. That allows me to associate some of the secondary education practices with the findings in the papers presented today. In the system with which I

am most familiar, about 39% of the freshman class are minority students from disadvantaged backgrounds, but about 14% of the students graduating from the high schools are from disadvantaged backgrounds. Something occurs during those few years between the ninth and twelfth grade regarding the success of the student in school. The seniors in this system are scoring in the 85 to 95 percentile in reading and math. This particular chunk of reality can be related to what Catterall discovers in his study; the generic high school system through tracking and proficiency hurdles screens out a large number of students through an attrition process and those who are discouraged disappear from the test taking population. The high school, therefore, is like a funnel with a large heterogeneous group of students entering the wide end and a small select homogeneous group coming out through the spout at the other end. The system is exclusionary by design. Often, our simplistic solution to the problems of students who can't pass through the gates of school success is to offer alternative programs which allow them to report to an off campus center for remedial work and/or attendance purposes. This vaguely reminds us of the findings of Baenen and Hopkins regarding alternative programs. Those students disassociated from school in alternative programs become more at risk than those who were retained and stayed in touch with the conventional school.

Now we reach the core of my assignment for today. What are the implications of the research findings we heard today for policy and practice. I have framed the implications in the form of seven questions with a brief comment on each. Educational practitioners and school boards must look at the research and consider these questions if we are to mitigate the effects of retention and of promotional gates on student drop outs.

1. Are educators perceiving their roles properly?

   Practitioners in the field have to take a different view of education in America. Some one said, and I can't remember who, that "parents send to us what they have, they don't keep the good kids at home." Teachers and administrators must realize that education in America should not be a selective process where curriculum, tests, behavioral objectives, retention policies are developed for the purposes of screening people out of the system. Our role is not to keep gates but to tear down the fences which are barriers to learning. We must develop the attitudes and the conditions which clearly communicate the fact that children in the system will succeed because everyone can learn. This is an implication for policy and practice.

2. Are standardized proficiency tests used because the educational practitioners are unskilled in discerning whether or not a child has learned what a child should know?

If the answer to that question is "yes," then we must do what we can to provide the skills to shore up that deficiency. This has great importance to Schools of Education and to staff development practices in school districts. But I believe that teachers know what they are supposed to teach and are capable of assessing how well they are teaching. The professional role of the teacher must be re-established and sufficient latitude and resources must be provided for them to do the job. This requires the reduction of bureaucratic and political gate keeping procedures which impede the professionalization of teachers. Quantitative assessments which measure attainment of isolated skills do not describe outcomes of good education. These are devices which have no relationship to quality and tend to reduce the creativity in learning and encourages mediocrity in teaching.

3. Are conventional at-risk intervention programs successful?

Pull-out programs which remediate children in isolated homogeneous groups must be examined. We have had too much of that in some of our learning disability programs in special education where children become "lifers" in classes from which there is no escape. An ongoing association with an adult in the least restrictive environment is more important to at-risk students than the conventional impersonal approach practiced in middle and secondary schools. This again was reinforced by Baenen and Hopkins when they found that children, even if retained, fared better in a familiar environment than those students who were spared retention, but were remediated in an off-campus situation or segregated in an on-campus program.

4. Are practitioners overemphasizing academic skill development and proficiency hurdles without providing adequate support systems to at-risk students?

Self esteem in the student begins at a very early age; the child's bonding with school must begin at the earliest possible grade level. I don't mean isolated periods where a self esteem curriculum is taught; I mean developing a climate in schools and classes which creates confidence in children. In every paper presented here, in one way or another, the issue of

student self esteem and its relationship to school success was mentioned. Closely associated with the concept of self esteem and school bonding is the way we teach young children. Retention must be avoided and school programs for young children must promote oral language development, goal setting, play activities, student initiated instruction and other developmentally appropriate programs. Pre-school and Kindergarten programs similar to the High Scope curriculum must be available for the very young child.

5. How can retention and other barriers to student success be eliminated?

Districts must review the conventional methods of education. We must evaluate the practices of tracking, traditional grade level configurations, homogeneous grouping, quantitative evaluation systems, custodial pre-school care programs and so called academic kindergartens, pre kindergartens, junior kindergartens and transitional kindergartens. We must look at more relevant approaches to education such as ungraded primary education programs similar to the Joplin Plan, cooperative learning, ethnographic approaches to student evaluation, middle school advisement and/or touchstone programs, longer core periods in middle schools, upscaling teacher training and district staff development programs, and school based management systems which empower teachers to grow and develop in a meaningful context.

6. When and where should at-risk intervention programs be initiated?

At risk children must be identified early. The identification will not be done by tests, but by astute teachers who are keen observers and who understand the signs of at-riskness. Ken and Yetta Goodwin would call this process, "kid watching." Let's deal with the situation when at-risk behaviors are first seen. The, "I can't do anything about it" attitude has to change and teachers have to believe that every child can learn and if a child isn't learning something must be done about it, now. We are waiting too long to provide help to students, or we see the futility of trying to seek help because the only alternative is a pull out remediation program like special education. We must look at the classroom teacher as the orchestrator of support services where resource people come to the classroom and the teacher and the support person work together in the regular classroom meeting the needs of students. The teacher must not pass the teaching responsibility to someone who receives children down the hall. When that happens everyone abdicates responsibility.

7. How are articulation programs in elementary and secondary schools working?

Baenen and Hopkins discussed the lack of follow through of at-risk students returning to their home schools from alternative remedial programs. The basic problem for at-risk students, especially in tracked or homogeneous systems, is that there are minimal transition programs for them. Most tracked systems or homogeneous grouping systems automatically promote self fulfilling prophesies about the lower tracked student and tend to concentrate on the college bound student. Providing advocates for at-risk students who intervene when forced attrition mechanisms occur may be a stop gap method for disadvantaged students while the system is restructured. Patchwork type of alternative programs for at-risk students are too little and too late. Any good program for at-risk intervention must be status oriented, integrated in the fabric of the school and motivate students.

The implications of the findings in these papers requires a restructuring of education which will eliminate some of the gross factors which cause student drop outs. Retention, alternative programs, pull out programs, proficiency gate testing procedures militate against the success of students in school. They lower educational standards and create what they were originally designed to prevent; they are counter-productive. But the real challenge for us is to take the research reported in forums like this and increase the knowledge base of politicians, boards of education and the general public so that there will be the political will to change the system and make it effective for <u>all</u> students.

I didn't mean to range too far afield from the intention of this session, but in closing I would like to quote from Eric Hoffer who said, "In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists." The findings of these papers herald the need for us to look at changing the practices that cause student drop outs.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baenen, Nancy R., & Hopkins, Patricia (1989, March) *Secondary Retention Alternative--Austin ISD.* Paper presented at annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.

Catterall, James S., (1989, March) *Standards and School Dropouts: A National Study of the Minimum Competency Test.* Paper presented at annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.

Grissom, James B., & Shepard, Lorrie A, (1989, March) *Structural Equation Modeling of Retention and Overage Effects on Dropping Out of School.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.

Rice, William K. Jr., Toles, Ronald, & Schulz, E. Matthew, (1989, March) *Retention in Grade School and the Impact on High School Graduation - Continuing Study of Factors Leading to Terminal Decisions.* Paper presented at annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.